

English summary: Leaders Who Learn

An idiographic and nomothetic study into the influence of Personality, Learning Behaviour and Learning Opportunities on the development of Leadership Competences at the top

The theme of 'Leadership' seems to be more popular than ever and demand for good 'leaders' is a hot topic in business, the healthcare sector, as well as in government and politics. The importance of good leaders to enable organizations to obtain results has been underlined in depth in several publications (Bray et al, 1979; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Howard & Bray, 1988; Covey, 1992; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1996; Hesselbein et al, 1996; Drucker, 1996; Ulrich et al, 1999). And finding talented leaders is a point of great concern for the boards of a great many organizations.

Leadership and Leadership Development have always been important themes within the HR sciences field. A great deal of research has been done into how managers learn (Lindsey, Holes & McCall, 1987; McCauly et al, 1994; Jansen, 1997; Jansen, 2006 a/b; Van der Sluis, 2000; Lankhuijzen, 2002; Vinkenbunrg & Pepermans, 2005), but it often focused on managers at lower levels of the organization, like new managers and management trainees. Little is clear about exactly how managers at the highest levels ('senior managers') of organizations learn. Very little empirical research has been done into this. Due to the nature of their work, these managers have few opportunities to study or take training courses.

The objective of this study, as described in this thesis, is to contribute knowledge as regards leadership development and to make a practical contribution to designing successful leadership programmes. This is not so much about specifically what we should offer these leaders in leadership courses, but rather: "How can leaders be helped to learn in respect of their leadership competences?"

This has led to the following central research question: What is the effect of personal and organizational factors on the ability to learn leadership competences?

The original study looked at the issue from a nomothetic perspective with the aim of formulating patterns which can be generally applied to individuals and/or groups. Due to some fundamental changes in the study group, the strategy of the study was changed from a solely nomothetic approach to a combination of an idiographic and a nomothetic approach.

The study group consisted of 40 managers in the highest layer of management just below the Executive Board of an internationally active Dutch company, with commercial activities in over 60 countries, including its own sales and service branches in over 30 of these

countries. Of the original group of top-40 managers, files belonging to 25 of them were eventually found to be suitable for further study by means of a T-1 measurement.

The study consisted of a baseline measurement (T-0) of leadership behaviour, measured on the basis of leadership competences, carried out among a group of leaders in the highest levels of the organization and a re-measurement (T-1) after a period of approximately three years, carried out among the same group of leaders. During the T-0 measurement every individual leader underwent a two-day individual learning programme where they were confronted with their current behaviour as leaders, using feedback derived from a 360-degree questionnaire. In addition, an extensive interview was held with every leader, where they were confronted with their dilemmas as leaders and where they experimented with old and new forms of behaviour in leadership simulations, after which video feedback was given. The last part of this two-day leadership programme consisted of the leaders drawing up their own Individual Development Plans (IDP), in which they formulated their learning objectives following reflection on the developmental experiences they had gained during the learning programme. In the final phase of the programme, the IDP was discussed at length with the adviser, who made a number of concrete development suggestions. After a period of barely three years (the T-1 measurement), the leaders' scores on the same leadership competences were assessed again, using the same 360-degree feedback technique, to see which developmental experiences and personal variables had led to an improvement in their leadership competences, i.e. 'learning' in this study.

This thesis follows Vroom & Jago's (2007) definition of leadership: "a process of motivating people to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things". In this thesis, leadership is taken to be a leader's personal intention (after Covey, 2004) and is defined as: "getting things done for and by other people, based on a vision" (after Van Loon & Hoving, 2002).

This thesis distinguishes clusters of leadership competences within four 'leadership roles':

1. Within the role of 'Person': Ethics, Learning Orientation, Human Focus and the Ability to Adapt;
2. Within the role of 'Entrepreneur': Entrepreneurial Spirit, Vision, Flexible Behaviour, Customer Focus, Awareness of One's Environment and Decisiveness;
3. Within the role of 'Manager': Group Leadership, Problem Analysis, Results Focus, Planning & Organising, Delegating and Monitoring;
4. Within the role of 'Coach': Inter-personal Sensitivity, Judgment, Cooperation, Persuasiveness and Awareness of Organizational Context.

In this thesis, learning is seen as an active and socially interactive process, where both context variables and personal variables play an important role (Kolb, 1984; McCauley et al, 1994; Van der Sluis, 2000; Bandura, 1977). The learning model used in this thesis

makes a distinction between the three elements of 'Assessment', 'Challenge' and 'Support'. Developmental Experiences become more powerful the more these three elements are represented in them (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). The factor 'Challenge' plays a particularly important role in the power of the developmental experience. Because of the power of daily practice, specifically for the target group in this study, this study starts from 'on-the-job' developmental experiences, also called Learning Opportunities. In the context of this thesis, the dependent variable learning is defined as enlarging the leader's effectiveness in handling the various leadership roles, as can be witnessed through an expansion and/or better command of the behavioural repertoire (after McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004).

As to the independent variable of Learning Behaviour, Van der Sluis' (2000) project approach was chosen: Planned learning, Instruction-oriented learning, Emergent Learning and Meaning-oriented learning. The Big Five factors 'Neuroticism', 'Extraversion', 'Openness', 'Agreeableness' and 'Conscientiousness' (Barrick & Mount, 1991, 1993; McCrae, 1992) were chosen to define the independent variable of Personality.

The independent variable of Learning Opportunities has been subdivided into four groups, 'Transitions', 'Task-related Characteristics', 'Obstacles' and 'Support' (Van der Sluis, 2000; Hoeksema, 1997; Megginson, 1997).

In summary, it can be concluded that learning occurs within all the competence clusters that make up the leadership roles of Person, Entrepreneur, Manager and Coach if we look at the average learning results measured by the difference in the 360-degree feedback scores leaders award themselves at the T-0 moment versus the T-1 moment. This relates to the personality aspects within the 'Big Five' personality factors rather than the actual personality factors.

The combination of idiographic and nomothetic analysis leads to two main profiles:

1. The learning leader: The dominant, sociable and conscientious intellectualist. This includes the individual cases of the 'Decisive', the 'Socially Strong' and the 'Visionary' leader.
2. The non-learning leader: The assertive, irritable, hurried and restless adventurer. This includes the individual cases of the 'Worrier', the 'Idealist', the 'Hurried' and the 'Self-Assured' leader.

'Decisive' leaders can be characterised as people whose actions are in line with their beliefs, who take matters seriously and achieve changes. The high aspect scores are in the fields of 'Extraversion', 'Openness' and 'Conscientiousness'. A decisive leader takes on a distinct executive attitude, exhibits power and energy, may appear to be arrogant, but does not look for conflict and is accommodating when conflicts do occur. This leader is like a dog whose "bark is worse than his bite". They mainly learn from retrospection and

assimilation and directly link their considerations and reflections to daily practice, in line with the learning opportunity which appeals to them the most, i.e. 'Task-related Characteristics'.

'Socially Strong' leaders resemble the Decisive leader, but add a distinct social and intellectualist component to this. Socially strong leaders also score high on aspects relating to 'Extraversion', 'Openness', and 'Conscientiousness', as well as those relating to 'Agreeableness'. These leaders are open to aesthetics and feelings, have a strong will to perform, while also observing socio-ethical standards and acting with care in dealings with others. Such a leader is like "driving a Porsche with the handbrake on". This combination of personality and retrospective learning, both reflective and assimilating, seems to be conducive to learning leadership competences.

The profile of a 'Visionary' leader is comparable to that of the Socially Strong leader, but they have less of a socio-emotional focus, have a strong visionary attitude, are honest and have an optimistically creative nature. These leaders are level-headed, intellectually assertive and dominant, and compensate for their dominant attitude by an accommodating disposition. They score high on aspects related to 'Extraversion', 'Openness', 'Agreeableness' and 'Conscientiousness'. The visionary leader displays a strong intellectualist disposition. They are like the wise owl: heard but not seen. This leader's learning behaviour is retrospective, both emergent and meaning-oriented and they learn from their mistakes and from self-reflection, which is in keeping with their intellectualist and open disposition.

'Worrying' leaders are characterized by the fact that, just like socially strong leaders, they are susceptible to emotional signals and are also assertive and dominant, while at the same time being barely open to new experiences, being rather critical of others and refusing to accept personal criticism. This leader's assertive attitude is not compensated by any aspect in the personality domains Agreeableness or Conscientiousness. They can be qualified as worriers who are always thinking about what went wrong, without finding fault with themselves and who then have too little decisiveness to make the necessary changes. In sports terms, they are the people sitting on the sidelines rather than the players. Their main learning behaviour is meaning-oriented learning, but since they receive little support from superiors and have insufficient imagination, they do not really know what to do about mistakes.

A remarkable feature of the 'Idealist' leader is that, like worriers, they score high on 'Assertiveness', but have a much more open disposition as regards their own feelings and views. Where 'top-learners' more or less compensate for a high score on 'Assertiveness' by some aspects in the domain of 'Agreeableness', this is not the case with idealists. They are irritated by the fact that they are unable to achieve their goals and, just like worriers, they will look for the cause outside themselves. Idealists envisage an ideal picture, but seem to lack the decisiveness to make this come true (domain of 'Conscientiousness'). Where

learning opportunities and learning behaviour are concerned, they depend on retrospective learning and need their superior's support. They qualify this as their strongest learning opportunity.

The personality profile displayed by a 'Hurried' leader is the one considered to be an ideal management profile in the selection consultancy business: stable, energetic, dominant, sociable, activity-focussed, ambitious and disciplined, without being maladjusted. Just like the top-learners in this study, they are found to score high on aspects in the domains of 'Extraversion', 'Openness', and 'Conscientiousness'. Nevertheless, hurried leaders score low as regards learning leadership competences. Hurried leaders learn by retrospection and identify their learning opportunities as 'Task-related Characteristics' and 'Support'. However, a striking fact is that their careers are characterised by 'Transitions', something they reinforce themselves by constantly looking for new activities and adjusting to the environments they are placed in. Their high pace of living and working and their restless and inquisitive disposition, combined with their ambition to achieve good results and their sense of duty, make them hurried people.

'Self-assured' leaders are characterised by their stable, carefree and self-assured attitude. They are not easily put off, are assertive and can easily reject personal criticism, are optimists and show little involvement. They have a good sense of duty and are success-driven. They seem to have an insufficient appreciation of how they are seen by their environment, given the discrepancy between their positive evaluation of their own achievements as regards learning leadership competences and the negative appraisal given by their environment. They do not achieve high scores on any aspects in the 'Openness' domain. Just like hurried leaders, these leaders' main learning opportunities are retrospection, 'Task-related Characteristics' and 'Support', whereas their careers are characterised by 'Transitions'.

The most important conclusion of this study is that the dominant factor in learning is not learning behaviour but personality. Not the personality dimensions, but the personality aspects and how they are 'in balance' and 'compensate' for each other. This 'balance' process is a complex interaction between personality aspects, learning behaviour and learning opportunities. In practice this means that learning programmes for leaders should mainly focus on retrospection and on the leader's day-to-day working practice.